

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1NEW YORK TIMES
15 April 1986

U.S. Reports Failure In Recent Soviet Test Of Big New Missile

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 14 — United States Government experts said today that the Soviet Union had recently tested its largest new land-based missile, but that the test had apparently ended in failure and that there were indications the missile might have exploded.

The missile, a successor to the SS-18, had not been previously flight-tested, according to officials familiar with intelligence reports. The failure, earlier this month, is thought to have occurred during the first flight test.

The new weapon is a liquid-fueled missile, like the SS-18, and is part of a program to replace old missiles with new systems by the mid-1990's. The Pentagon has said that the new missile will be deployed in existing silos through the end of the century.

One American official said the missile had emerged from its silo during the test, malfunctioned and never left the test flight area. Other officials said that there had been an explosion and that some of the test facilities had been damaged.

"It was not a resounding success,"

an official said. He added that he assumed the Soviet Union would resolve the engineering problems.

The SS-18, which was first deployed in 1982, is generally deemed to be the most accurate Soviet missile and the one that poses the greatest threat to United States missile silos. The Soviet Union has 308 of the missiles, which carry 10 warheads, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency disagree whether another Soviet missile, the SS-19, also deployed in 1982, is sufficiently accurate to threaten United States silos in a first strike. The SS-24 missile is also considered by intelligence experts to be less accurate than the SS-18 and to lack the combination of accuracy and explosive power to present a first-strike threat.

The 1979 treaty on strategic arms limitation, which has not been ratified but which both sides have said they would observe, contains provisions intended to block the development of new heavy missiles that differ significantly from the SS-18. But under the treaty, the Soviet Union is allowed to develop and deploy a modernized version of the SS-18.

Because the new missile has not been flight-tested, the United States has no basis to judge whether the system is indeed a permissible variation of the SS-18. The United States has said that the new version of the SS-18 is part of a large effort to modernize the Soviet arsenal.

In addition to the successor to the SS-18, the Soviet Union is expected to

flight-test two other land-based missiles over the next four years, according to Central Intelligence Agency testimony in Congress. The other missiles are expected to be new versions of the SS-24, which the Soviet Union may deploy this year on rail cars and which may also be deployed in silos, and the SS-25, a mobile missile that is already being deployed.

The Pentagon has said that the Soviet Union is also flight-testing a multiple-warhead submarine-launched missile, the SS-N-23, as a replacement for the SS-N-18, which is deployed on submarines designated in the West as the Delta class.

In addition, the Pentagon has said that the Soviet Union will soon begin flight tests of a new version of the SS-N-20, which is deployed on Typhoon-class submarines.